Beacon

Book: 87

Nevaeh

Marcel Ray Duriez

25 Visitations

I felt like it was too early again when I woke up, and I knew I was getting the schedule of my days and nights slowly reversed. I lay in my bed and listened to the quiet voices of Naddalin Natalie and Jae in the other room. That they were loud enough for me to hear it at all was odd. I rolled until my feet touched the ground, then staggered into the living room.

The clock on the TV said it was just after two in the morning. Naddalin Natalie and Jae were sitting together on the couch, Naddalin Natalie sketching again as Jae looked over her shoulder. They did not raise their voices when I entered, too absorbed in Naddalin Natalie's work. I slipped over to Jae's side to have a look. Did she see anything more?

I asked him quietly. Yes. Something pulled him back into the room with the VCR, but it is

light now. I watched Naddalin Natalie draw a square room with dark beams on its low ceiling. The walls were paneled in wood, a bit too dark, outdated. The floor had a dark carpet with a pattern on it. There was a large window against the south wall, and an opening through the west wall led to the living room. One side of this entrance was stone - a large bronze stone fireplace that was open to both rooms.

The focus of the room from this vantage point, the TV and VCR, balanced on an undersized wooden stand, was in the southwest corner of the room. A curved aged sectional sofa in front of the TV, a round coffee table in front of it. The phone goes,' I whispered, pointing. Two pairs of eternal eyes stared at me. This is my mother's house. Naddalin Natalie was already off the couch, phone in hand, dialing. I looked at the accurate rendering

of my mother's family room. Unusually, Jae moved closer to me. He lightly touched his hand to my shoulder, and the physical contact made his calming influence stronger. The panic remained deaf, blurred. Naddalin Natalie's lips trembled from the speed of her words; the low hum impossible to decipher. I could not concentrate. Lily,' Naddalin Natalie said.

I looked at her numbly. Lily, Melvin is coming to get you. He, Dejen, and Melchor are going

to take you somewhere, to hide you for a while. Melvin is coming? The words were like a life jacket, holding my head above the deluge. Yes, it catches the first flight out of Altoona. We will meet him at the trains station, and you will go with him. But my mother... he came here for my mother, Naddalin Natalie! Despite Jae, hysteria built up in my voice. Jae and I will stay until she is safe. I cannot win, Naddalin Natalie. You cannot keep everyone I know forever. Can't you

see what he is doing? He does not follow me at all. He will find someone, he will hurt someone I love…Naddalin Natalie, I cannot - 'We'll catch him, Lily,' she assured me.

What if you get hurt, Naddalin Natalie? Do you think this suits me? Do you think it is only my human family that he can hurt me with? Naddalin Natalie looked at Jae with a meaningful eye. A deep, heavy fog of lethargy came over me, and my eyes closed

without my permission. My mind struggled against the fog, realizing what was happening. I opened my eyes and stood up, stepping away from Jae's hand. I do not want to go back to sleep,' I snapped. I walked to my room and shut the door, really slammed it, so I could be free to go to pieces privately. This time Naddalin Natalie did not follow me. For three and a half hours, I stared at the wall, curled up in a ball, walking around. My mind raced, trying to find a way

out of this nightmare. There was no escape, no reprieve. I could only see one ending looming darkly in my future. The only question was how many other people would be hurt before I reached it. The only comfort, the only hope I had left, was knowing that I would see Melvin soon.

Maybe if I could just see his face again, I could also see the solution that has eluded me now. When the phone rang, I returned to the front room, a little ashamed

of my behavior. I hoped I had not offended either of them, that they would know how grateful I was for the sacrifices they were making on my behalf.

Naddalin Natalie was talking as fast as ever, but what caught my attention was that, for the first time, Jae was not in the room. I looked at the clock - it was five-thirty in the morning. They are just getting on their plane,' Naddalin Natalie told me. 'They will land at nine-forty-five. Just a

few more hours to keep breathing until he is here. Where is Jae? He went to check. You are not staying here? No, we are moving closer to your mother's house. My stomach twisted with worry at his words. But the phone rang again, distracting me. She looked surprised, but I was already walking forward, hopefully reaching for the phone. Hello? asked Naddalin Natalie. 'No, she is here. She held the phone for me.

Your mother, she put her mouth. Hello?' 'Lily? Lily? I was walking away from his sight in a crowded place. It was the sound of panic. I sighed. I expected this, although I tried to make my message as unarmored as possible without diminishing the sound of it. 'Emergency. Calm down, Mom,' I said in my most soothing voice, gently pulling away from Naddalin Natalie. I was not sure I could lie so convincingly with her eyes on me.' I am fine, okay? Just give me a

minute and I will explain everything, I promise. I stopped, surprised that she had not interrupted me yet. Mom?'

Be incredibly careful not to say anything until I tell you. The voice I heard now was as unknown as it was unexpected. It was a male tenor voice, a very pleasant generic voice - the kind of voice you have heard in the background of luxury car commercials. He spoke very quickly. Now, I do not need to hurt your mother, so

please do exactly as I say, and she will be fine. He paused for a minute while I listened in mute horror. 'It's very good,' he congratulated. 'Now repeat after me and try to sound natural. Please say, 'No, mom, stay where you are.' No, mom, stay where you are.

My voice was barely more than a whisper. I can see this is going to be difficult. The voice was amused, still light and friendly. 'Why don't you go into

another room now, so your face doesn't ruin everything?' There is no reason for your mother to suffer. As you walk, please say, 'Mom, please listen to me. » Say it now. Mom, please listen to me,' my voice pleaded.

I walked very slowly towards the bedroom, feeling Naddalin Natalie's worried gaze on my back. I closed the door behind me, trying to think clearly about the terror that gripped my brain. Right now, are you alone? Simply

answer yes or no. Yes.' 'But they can still hear you, I am sure. Yes.' 'Okay, then,' the pleasant voice continued, 'say, 'Mom, trust me.' 'Mom, trust me. It worked a little better than I expected. I was prepared to wait, but your mother arrived earlier than expected. It is easier that way, isn't it? Less suspense, less anxiety for you. I waited. Now, I want you to listen closely. I am going to need you to keep you away from your friends; do you think you can do it? Answer

yes or no. No. I am sorry to hear that. I was hoping you would be a little more creative than that. Do you think you could walk away from them if your mother's life depended on it? Answer yes or no. Somehow, there had to be a way. I remembered we were going to the trains station. Sky Harbor International Airport: crowded, confusingly laid out...' Yeah.' ' It is better. I am sure it will not be easy, but if I get the slightest glimmer that you have a business,

well, that would be bad for your mother,' the friendly voice promised. 'You must know enough about us by now to realize how quickly I would know if you tried to bring someone with you. And how long would I need to deal with your mother if that were the case? Do you understand? Answer yes or no. Yes. My voice broke. All right, Lily.

Now, this is what you need to do. I want you to go to your mother's. Next to the phone,

there will be a number. Call him, and I will tell you where to go from there. I already knew where I would go, and where it would end. But I would follow his instructions exactly. 'Can you do this? Answer yes or no. Yes.' 'Before noon, please, Lily. I do not have all day,' he said politely. Where's Phil? I asked laconically. Ah, be careful now, Lily. asks you to speak, please. I have been waiting. It is important now that you do not make your friends suspicious when

you return to them. Tell them your mother called and you told her not to go home just yet. Now repeat after me, 'Thank you, mum.' Say it now. Thank you, mum. The tears were coming. I tried to push them back. Say, 'I' love, mom, I will see you soon.' Say it now.

I love you, Mom. My voice was thick. 'I'll see you soon,' I promised. 'Goodbye, Lily. I cannot wait to see you again. He hung up. held the phone to my ear. My joints were frozen with terror -

I could not undo my fingers to drop them. I knew I had to think, but my head was filled with the sound of my mother's panic. Seconds ticked by as I fought for control. Slowly, slowly, my thoughts began to shatter beyond this brick wall of pain. To plan. For I had no choice now but one: go into the mirrored room and die. I had no guarantees, nothing to give to keep my mother alive. I could only hope that Pierre would be satisfied to win the match, that beating Melvin would

be enough. Desperation m grabbed it; there was no way to negotiate, nothing I could offer or withhold that could sway him. But I still had no choice. I had to try. I fought back the terror as best I could. My decision has been made. There is no point in wasting time agonizing over the outcome. I had to think because Naddalin Natalie and Jae were waiting for me, and avoiding them was essential, and impossible. I was suddenly grateful that Jae was gone.

If he had been here to feel my anguish in the last five minutes, how could I have stopped them from being suspicious? I stifled the fear, the anxiety, I tried to stifle it. I could not afford it now. I did not know when he would return. I focused on my escape. I had to hope that my familiarity with the trains station would turn the odds in my favor. Somehow, I had to keep Naddalin Natalie away...I knew Naddalin Natalie was in the other room

waiting for me, curious. But I had to deal with something else in private before Jae got back. I had to accept that I would not see Melvin again, not even a last glimpse of his face to take with me to the hall of mirrors. I was going to hurt her, and I could not say goodbye to her. I let the waves of torture wash over me and have their way for a while. Then I pushed them away, too, wanting to face Naddalin Natalie. The only expression I could manage was a

dull, dead stare. I saw her alarm and did not wait for her to ask. I only had one script and I would never manage improvisation now. My mother was worried, she wanted to go home. But that is okay, I convinced her to stay away. My voice was lifeless. We will make sure she is okay, Lily, do not worry. I turned away; I could not let her see my face. My eye fell on a blank page of hotel stationery on the desk. I took it slowly, a plan forming. There was also an

envelope there. It was good. Naddalin Natalie, I asked slowly, without turning around, keeping my voice level. 'If I write a letter to my mother, would you give it to her? Leave it at home, I mean. Of course, Lily.

His voice was cautious. She could see me coming apart at the seams. I had to keep my emotions under better control. I returned to the bedroom and knelt beside the small bedside table to write. Melvin,' I wrote. My hand

was shaking, the letters were barely legible. I like you. I am sorry. He has my mother, and I must try. I know that might not work. I am deeply sorry. Do not be mad at Naddalin Natalie and Jae. If I walk away from them, it will be a miracle. Tell them to thank you for me. Naddalin Natalie, please. And please, please do not come after him. That is what he wants. I think.

I cannot stand it if someone must get hurt because of me, especially you. Please, that is

the only thing I can ask of you right now. For me. I like you. Forgive me. Lily carefully folded the letter and sealed it in the envelope. He would eventually find it. I only hoped he would understand and listen to me once. And then I carefully sealed my heart.

26 Disguise

had taken a lot less time than I thought - all the terror, the despair, the bursting of my heart. Minutes passed more slowly than

usual. Jae still had not returned when I returned to Naddalin Natalie. I was afraid of being in the same room as her, afraid of her guessing... and afraid of hiding from her for the same reason. I would have thought I was way beyond being surprised, my thoughts tortured and unsteady, but I was startled when I saw Naddalin Natalie bent over the desk, gripping the edge with both hands. Naddalin Natalie? She did not react when I called her name,

but her head was slowly rocking from side to side, and I saw her face. His eyes were blank, dazed... My thoughts flew to my mother. Was I already too late? I rushed to his side, automatically reaching out to touch his hand. Naddalin Natalie! Jae's voice whipped, and then he was right behind her, his hands wrapping around hers, loosening them from their grip on the table. On the other side of the room, the door closed with a faint click. What is that? he asked. She

turned her face away from me, into her chest.

'Lily,' she said. 'I am here,' I replied. His head was writhing, his eyes locking on mine, their expression still oddly empty. I immediately realized that she had not spoken to me, she had answered Jae's question. What did you see? I said - and there was no doubt in my flat, callous voice. Jae looked at me sharply. I kept my expression blank and waited. Her eyes were confused as they

flickered rapidly between Naddalin Natalie's face and mine, sensing the chaos...for I could guess what Naddalin Natalie had seen now. A quiet atmosphere settles around me. I welcomed it, using it to keep my emotions disciplined, and in check. Naddalin Natalie, too, has recovered. Nothing, really,' she finally replied, her voice remarkably calm and convincing. 'Just the same room as before. She finally looked at me, her

expression smooth and withdrawn. 'Did you want breakfast?'

No, I am going to eat at the trains station. I was very calm too. I went to the bathroom to take a shower. As if I were borrowing Jae's weird extra sense, I could sense Naddalin Natalie's wild - albeit well-hidden - desperation to get me out of the room, to be alone with Jae. So, she could tell him that they were doing something wrong, that they were going to fail... I prepared myself

methodically, concentrating on every little task. I let my hair down, swirling around me, covering my face. The peaceful vibe Jae created went through me and helped me think clearly. Helped me plan. I dug in my bag until I found my sock full of money. I emptied it into my pocket. I was eager to get to the trains station, and happy when we left by seven. I sat alone this time in the back of the dark car. Naddalin Natalie leaned against the door, her face

towards Jae but, behind her sunglasses, glanced in my direction every few seconds. Naddalin Natalie? I asked indifferently. She was suspicious. 'Yes?'

'How does that work? The things you, see? I looked out the side window, and my voice was boring. 'Melvin said it was not final...that are things changing? It was harder than I thought to say his name. That is what must have alerted Jae, why a new wave of

serenity filled the car. Yes, things are changing... she whispered - hopefully, I thought. 'Some things are more certain than others...like the weather. People are tougher. I only see the course they are on while they are at it.' Once they change their minds - make a new decision, no matter how small - the whole future changes. I nodded thoughtfully. 'So, you couldn't see Pierre in Phoenix until you decided to come here.' Yes,' she agreed, suspicious again. And she had not

seen me in the hall of mirrors with Pierre until I decided to meet him there. I tried not to think about what else she could have seen. I did not want my panic to make Jae more suspicious. They would be watching me twice as carefully now, anyway, after Naddalin Natalie's vision. It was going to be impossible. We arrived at the trains station. Luck was with me, or it was simply good luck. Melvin's plane landed in Terminal Four, the largest terminal, where

most flights landed - so it was no surprise that he did. But it was the terminal I needed: the biggest, the most confusing. And there was a door on level three that might have been the only chance.

We parked on the fourth floor of the huge garage. I led the way, for once more knowledgeable about my surroundings than they were. We descended the elevator to level three, where the passengers unloaded. Naddalin Natalie and Jae spent a lot of time

looking at the departing flight board. I could hear them discussing the pros and cons of New York, Atlanta, and Texas. Places I had never seen. And would never see. I waited for my opportunity, impatient, unable to keep my toe from tapping. We sat in the long rows of chairs by the metal detectors, Jae and Naddalin Natalie pretending to be people watching but watching me. Every inch I moved in my seat was followed by a glance out of the

corner of their eyes. It was hopeless. Should I run? Would they dare physically arrest me in this public place? Or would they just follow? I took the unmarked envelope out of my pocket and placed it in Naddalin Natalie's black leather bag. She looked at me. My letter,' I said.

She nodded, tucking it under the top flap. He would find it soon enough. Minutes passed and Melvin's arrival drew closer. It was amazing how every cell in my body

seemed to know he was coming, to yearn for his coming. This made things exceedingly difficult. I found myself trying to think of excuses to stay, to see him first, and then make my escape. But I knew it was impossible if I was going to have a chance to escape. Several times Naddalin Natalie offered to have breakfast with me. Later, I told him, not yet. I looked at the arrival board, watching the flight after the flight arrived on time.

The flight from Altoona crept closer to the top of the board. And then, when I only had thirty minutes to escape, the numbers changed. His plane was ten minutes early. I had no more time. I am going to eat now,' I said quickly. Naddalin Natalie stood up. 'I will come with you. Do you mind if Jae comes instead? I asked. 'I feel a little...' I did not finish the sentence.

My eyes were wild enough to convey what I did not

say. Jae stood up. Naddalin Natalie's eyes were confused, but - I saw to my relief - not suspicious. She must attribute the change in her vision to a move by the tracker rather than betrayal on my part. Jae walked silently beside me, his hand on the little one on my back, as if guiding me. I pretended to have a lack of interest in the first cafes at the trains station, my head searching for what I wanted. And there it was, around the corner, out of Naddalin Natalie's sight: the

restroom on level three. Does that bother you? I asked Jae casually. 'I will just be for a while. 'I will be here,' he said. As soon as the door closed behind me, I ran. I remembered the time I got lost in that bathroom because there were two exits. Outside the far door, it was only a short sprint to the elevators, and if Jae stayed where he said he would, I would never be in his sights.

I did not look behind me as I ran. It was my only chance,

and even if he saw me, I had to keep going. People looked, but I ignored them. Around the corner, the elevators were waiting, and I rushed forward, throwing my hand between the closing doors of a full elevator headed down. I squeezed in next to the irritated passengers and checked to make sure the level one button had been pressed. It was already on, and the doors closed. As soon as the door opened, I was off again, to the sound of annoying whispers behind

me. I slowed down as I passed the security guards by the baggage carousels, only to start again when the exit doors came into view. I had no way of knowing if Jae was still looking for me. I would only have a few seconds if he followed my scent.

I jumped through the automatic doors, almost banging into the glass when they opened too slowly. Along the crowded sidewalk, there was no cab in sight. I did not have the time.

Naddalin Natalie and Jae were about to realize I was gone, or they already had. They found me in a heartbeat. A shuttle to the Hyatt was closing a few feet behind me. Wait! I called, running, greeting the driver. It is the shuttle to the Hyatt,' the driver said in confusion as he opened the doors. Yes, I breathed, that is where I am going. I rushed up the stairs. He looked kindly at my condition without luggage, but then shrugged, not

caring enough to ask. Most of the seats were empty.

I sat as far away from other travelers as possible and watched out the window as first the sidewalk, then the trains station rolled away. I could not help but imagine Melvin, where he would be standing by the side of the road when he found the end of my trail. I could not cry yet, I told myself. I still had a long way to go. My luck held. In front of the Hyatt, a tired-looking couple was pulling

their last suitcase out of the trunk of a taxi. I jumped off the shuttle and ran for the cabin, sliding into the seat behind the driver. The tired couple and the shuttle driver looked at me. I told the surprised taxi driver my mother's address. 'I need to get there as soon as possible.

'It's in Scottsdale,' he complained. I threw eighty over the seat. Will this be enough? Of course, kid, no problem. I sat back in the seat, crossing my arms in

my lap. The familiar city began to rush around me, but I did not look out the windows. I tried to stay in control. I was determined not to get lost at this point now that my plan was completed. There was no point in indulging in more terror, more anxiety. My path was marked out. I just had to follow him now.

So, instead of panicking, I closed my eyes and spent the twenty-minute drive with Melvin. I imagined that I had stayed at the trains station to meet Melvin. I

visualized how I would stand on my toes, the sooner to see his face. How fast, how elegantly he moved through the crowds of people that separated us. And then I would run to close those last feet between us - reckless as always - and I would be in his marble arms, safe at last. I wondered where we would have gone. North somewhere, so he could be out in the day. Or somewhere far away, so we can lie in the sun together again. I imagined him at the edge of the

shore, his skin sparkling like the sea. No matter how long we had to hide. Being trapped in a hotel room with him would be heaven. So many questions I still had for him. I could talk to him forever, never sleep, never leave his side. I could see his face so clearly now...almost hear his voice. And, despite all the horror and despair, I was fleetingly happy. I was so involved in my escapist daydreams; I lost track of race seconds. Hey, what was the

number? The taxi driver's question pierced my fantasy, letting all the colors run out of my beautiful illusions. Fear, dark and harsh, was waiting to fill the space they left behind. Fifty-eight twenty-one. My voice sounded strangled. The taxi driver looked at me, nervous that I had an episode or something. So here we are. He was eager to get me out of his car, hoping I would not ask for change.

Thanks,' I whispered. There was no need to be afraid, I

reminded myself. The house was empty. I had to hurry; my mother was waiting for me, scared, depended on me. I ran for the door, reaching automatically to grab the key under the eaves. I unlocked the door. It was dark inside, empty, normal. I ran to the phone, turning on the kitchen light on my way. There on the whiteboard was a ten-digit number written in a neat little hand. My fingers fell on the keyboard, making mistakes. I had to hang up

and start over. I focused only on the buttons this time, carefully pressing each one in turn. I succeeded. I held the phone to my ear with a shaky hand. He only rang once. Hello Lily answered that easy voice. 'It was very quick. I am impressed. Is my mother, okay?

She is perfectly fine. Do not worry, Lily, I do not fight with her. Unless you came alone, of course. Lighthearted, fun. I am alone. I had never been so alone in

my entire life. Particularly good. Now, do you know the ballet studio just around the corner from your house?' Yes. I know how to get there. Well, then, I will see you soon. I hung. I ran from the room, through the door, into the baking heat. There was no time to look back at my house, and I did not want to see it as it was now - empty, a symbol of fear instead of a sanctuary. The last person to walk into these familiar rooms was my enemy. Out of the corner of my

eye, I could almost see my mother standing in the shade of the tall eucalyptus tree where I had played as a child. Or kneeling in front of the small plot of land around the mailbox, the graveyard of all the flowers she had tried to grow.

The memories were better than any reality I would see today. But I ran away from them, towards the corner, leaving everything behind. I felt so slow, like I was running through wet sand - I could not seem to get

enough buy from the concrete. I tripped several times, once falling, catching myself with my hands, scraping them on the pavement, then rushing to dive forward again. But anyway, I am done around the corner. Just another street now; I ran, sweat running down my face, panting. The sun was hot on my skin, too bright as it bounced off the white concrete and blinded me. I felt dangerously exposed. More fiercely than I could have imagined, I wished for the

green, protective forests of McAuley...of home. When I rounded the last corner, on Cactus, I could see the studio, looking like I remembered it. The parking lot out front was empty, vertical blinds in all the windows drawn. I could not run anymore - I could not breathe anymore; effort and fear had gotten the best of me. I thought of my mother keeping my feet moving, one in front of the other. As I approached, I could see the panel inside the door. It was

handwritten on bright pink paper; he said the dance studio was closed for spring break. I touched the handle and pulled it carefully. It has been unlocked. I fought to catch my breath and opened the door. The lobby was dark and empty, cool, the air conditioner thrumming. Plastic molded chairs were stacked along the walls and the carpet smelled of shampoo. The west dance floor was dark, I could see through the open observation window. The eastern

dance floor, the largest room, was lit. But the blinds were closed on the window. Terror gripped me so strongly that I was trapped by it.

I could not move my feet. And then my mother's voice called. Lily? Lily? That same tone of hysterical panic. I sprinted for the door at the sound of his voice. Lily, you scared me! Do not you ever do this to me again! His voice continued as I ran into the long, high-ceilinged room. I looked around, trying to find where his

voice was coming from. I heard her laugh, and I whirled at the sound. There she was, on the television screen, ruffling my hair in high relief. It was Thanksgiving, and I was twelve. We went to see my grandmother in California the last year before she died. We went to the beach one day, and I had leaned too far over the edge of the pier. She had seen my feet thrashing, trying to regain my balance. 'Lily? Lily? she had called me out of fear. And then the TV

screen was blue. I turned around slowly. He was standing very still near the back exit, so I still did not notice him at first. In his hand was a remote control. We looked at each other for a long moment, then he smiled. He walked towards me, close, then passed me to put the remote control next to the VCR.

I turned carefully to look at him. Sorry about that, Lily, but isn't it better that your mother did not have to be involved in any of

this? His voice was courteous and kind. And suddenly it hit me. My mother was safe. She was still in California. She had never understood my message. She had never been terrified by the dark red eyes in the abnormally pale face in front of me. She was safe. 'Yes,' I replied, my voice saturated with relief. You do not seem mad that I cheated on you. I am not. My sudden euphoria made me brave. What did it matter now? It would soon be over.

Charlie and Mom would never be hurt, never have to fear. I felt almost dizzy. An analytical part of my mind warned me that I was dangerously close to breaking stress. It is strange. You mean it. His dark eyes surveyed me with interest. The irises were almost black, with just a hint of ruby at the edges. Thirst. 'I'm going to give your strange coven so much; you humans can be very interesting.' I guess I can see the appeal of watching you. It is

amazing - some of you seem to have no sense of self-interest at all. He was standing a few feet away from me, arms crossed, looking at me curiously.

There was no threat in his face or his stance. He looked so average, nothing remarkable about his face or body at all. Just the pale skin, circled eyes that I had become so used to. He wore a pale blue long-sleeved shirt and faded blue jeans. You are going to tell me your boyfriend's going to get

revenge? he asked, I hope that sounded like me. No, I do not think so. At least I asked him not to. And what was his response to that? I do not know. It was oddly easy to converse with this genteel hunter. 'I left him a letter. How romantic, one last letter. And do you think he will honor it? His voice was just a little harsher now, a hint of sarcasm that marred his polite tone. I hope. Hmmm. Well, our hopes differ then. You see, it was all just a little too easy, too fast. To

be completely honest, I am disappointed. I expected a much bigger challenge. And I only needed a little luck. I waited in silence. When Victoria could not reach your father, I asked her to find out more about you. There was no sense running around the planet chasing you when I could comfortably wait for you in a location of my choosing. So, after talking to Victoria, I decided to come to Phoenix to visit your mother. I heard you say you were

going home. At first, I never dreamed that you wanted it. But then I wondered. Humans can be very predictable; they like to be somewhere familiar, somewhere safe. And wouldn't that be the perfect ploy, to go to the last place you should be when hiding - the place you said you would be? But of course, I was not sure, it was just a hunch. I am used to having a feeling about the prey I am hunting, a sixth sense if you will. I listened to your message when I

arrived at your mother's house, but of course, I could not be sure where you called from. It was extremely helpful to have your number, but you could have been in Antarctica for all I knew, and the game would not work unless you were nearby. Then your boyfriend got on a plane to Phoenix.

Victoria watched them for me, of course; in a game with so many players, I could not work alone. And so, they told me what I

had hoped for, that you were here after all. I was ready; I had already browsed your charming films at home. And then it was just a matter of bluffing. Extremely easy, you know, not up to my standards. So, you see, I hope you are wrong about your boyfriend. Melvin, right? I did not answer. The bravado increased.

He was coming to the end of his gloat. It was not for me anyway. There was no glory in beating me, a weak human. Would

you mind very much if I left a little letter of my own for your Melvin? He stepped back and touched a palm-sized digital video camera carefully balanced above the stereo. A small red light indicated that it was already working. He adjusted it several times and expanded the frame. I looked at him in horror. I am sorry, but I do not think he will be able to resist chasing me after he watches this. And I would not want anything missing. That was all for him, of

course. You are simply a human, who was unfortunately in the wrong place, at the wrong time, and running with the wrong crowd, I might add. He walked over to me, smiling.

'Before we start...' I felt a nauseous loop in the pit of my stomach as he spoke. It was something I had not expected. I just want to rub it, just a little. The answer was there all along, and I was so scared that Melvin would see this and ruin my fun. It

happened once, oh, centuries ago. The only time my prey escaped me. You see, the vampire who so foolishly loved this little victim made the choice your Melvin was too weak to make. When the elder found out I was after his girlfriend, he stole her from the asylum where he worked - I will never understand the obsession some vampires seem to form with you humans - and as soon as he freed her, he made her safe.

She did not even seem to notice the pain, poor little creature. She had been stuck in this black hole of a cell for so long. A hundred years ago and she would have been burned at the stake for her visions. In the 1980s, it was an asylum and shock treatment. When she opened her eyes, strong in her fresh youth, it was as if she had never seen the sun before. The old vampire made her into a strong new vampire, and there was no reason for me to

touch her then. He sighed. 'I destroyed the old one for revenge. Naddalin Natalie, I breathed in amazement. Yes, your boyfriend. I was surprised to see her in the clearing. So, I guess his coven should be able to take some solace from this experience. I understand you, but they get it. The only victim that eluded me, quite an honor, in fact. And she smelled so delicious. I still regret never having had a taste... She smelled even better than you. Sorry - I do

not mean to be offensive. You have a genuinely nice smell. Floral, sort of...' He took another step toward me until he was inches away. He lifted a strand of my hair and sniffed it gently. Then he gently patted the strand in place, and I felt the tips of his cool fingers against my throat. He got up to stroke my cheek once quickly with his thumb, his face curious. I wanted to run so badly, but I was frozen I could not even flinch. "No," he muttered dropping his

hand, "I don't understand." He sighed. 'Well, I guess we should move on. And then I can call your friends and tell them where to find you, and my little message. I am sick now. There was pain coming, I could see it in his eyes.

It would not be enough for him to win, and feed, and There would be no quick end like I had counted on. My knees started to shake, and I was afraid I was going to fall. He backed up and started to pace around, casually, as if

trying to get a better view of a statue in a museum. His face was still open and friendly as he decided where to start. Then he sagged forward, into a crouch I recognized, and his pleasant smile slowly widened, grew, until it was not a smile at all, but a contortion of teeth, exposed and shimmering. I could not help myself, I tried to run. As useless as I knew it would be, as weak as my knees already were, panic took over and I bolted for the escape door.

He was in front of me in a flash. I did not see if he was using his hand or his foot, it was too fast. A crushing blow hit my chest - I felt myself fly backward, then heard the crack as my head banged into the mirrors.

The glass warped, some of the pieces shattering and shattering on the floor next to me. I was too stunned to feel pain. I could not breathe yet. He slowly walked toward me. It is a genuinely nice effect,' he said,

surveying the mess of the glass, his friendly voice again. 'I thought this piece would be visually dramatic for my little film. That is why I chose this place to meet you. It is perfect, isn't it? I ignored him, jostling on my hands and knees, crawling toward the other door. He was on top of me right away, his foot dropping hard on my leg. I heard the sickening snap before I felt it. But then I felt it, and I could not hold back my cry of agony.

I twisted to reach my leg, and he stood over me, smiling. Do you want to rethink your last request? he asked pleasantly. His toe nudged my broken leg, and I heard a piercing scream. With shock, I realized it was mine. Wouldn't you rather Melvin tries to find me? he asked. Nope! I chewed. 'No, Melvin, don't-' And then something shattered in my face, throwing me into the shattered mirrors. Above the pain in my leg, I felt the sharp tear

through my scalp where the glass cut into it.

-And-

Then the hot humidity started to shoot through my hair with alarming speed. I could feel it soaking the shoulder of my shirt and hear it dripping onto the wood below.

The smell of it twisted my stomach. Through nausea and dizziness, I saw something that gave me a sudden and final shred of hope. His eyes, previously

merely intentional, now burned with uncontrollable need. The blood - spilling crimson over my white shirt, pooling rapidly on the floor - was driving him mad with thirst. No matter his original intentions, he could not pull this off for much longer. That it was quick now was all I could hope for as the flow of blood from my head sucked my consciousness away with it. My eyes were closing. I heard as if underwater, the final growl of the hunter. I could see,

through the long tunnels, my eyes had become, his dark form coming towards me. With my last effort, my hand instinctively raised to protect my face. My eyes closed, and I drifted.